

A Strike against the Discourse of Unreason*

Prabhat Patnaik

The November 26 strike is significant not only because it protests against the Modi government's brazen and unprecedented attacks on workers and peasants in the country, not only because these attacks carry forward an imperialist agenda, but for a deeper and less discussed reason as well which can be seen as follows.

The ascendancy of the Hindutva elements derives from the success they have achieved in shifting the public discourse in the country. The discourse they displaced had occupied centre-stage for close to a century, indeed ever since 1917 when Gandhiji had visited Champaran to investigate the condition of the peasantry there. This discourse which underlay the entire anti-colonial struggle and the subsequent politics of post-independence India, right until the coming to power of the Hindutva forces, revolved around people's material life, or on the "this-sidedness" (to borrow a phrase from Marx) of their practical being. The role of the State was supposed to bring about an improvement in this material life, and different political formations vying to capture political power suggested different ways in which this could be done. Within this discourse in other words different political parties had different positions, but these positions were all articulated within this particular discourse, which had to do with poverty, unemployment, growth, development, healthcare, education, and numerous other issues linked to these.

Even Indira Gandhi's infamous Emergency which took away people's rights and imposed her authoritarian rule over the country, did not seek to alter this discourse; on the contrary she tried to make the Emergency palatable to people within this discourse itself, through her 20-point programme and such like pronouncements that were supposed to be a panacea for improving people's material lives. The BJP however is incapable of making any contribution within this discourse; it has scarcely any ideas of its own on economic matters, other than naïve adherence to hand-outs from its corporate sponsors or from Bretton Woods institutions.

In fact, its agenda has always been to change this discourse, and introduce an alternative one that concentrates exclusively on issues like building temples, destroying mosques, seeing terrorist conspiracies all around in which members of the minority community are involved, spreading hatred everywhere, and dividing people through a systematic inculcation of unreason. Unreason must necessarily inform this discourse since the hatred sought to be generated by it needs to be sustained by a narrative that obliterates the distinction between history and mythology and that has scant regard for evidence.

The corporate-financial oligarchy has much to gain from backing this substitution of discourses in the current context of the dead-end that neo-liberal capitalism has reached; the economic justification for its hegemony that were being advanced till now have ceased to carry any credibility, not only because there was no "trickle down" even when growth was apparently impressive, but also because this growth itself has now petered out because of the crisis of neo-liberalism, swelling unemployment even further. The change in discourse suits this oligarchy in the new

situation, which is why it has propelled the BJP to power with massive financial support.

The BJP's remaining in power depends crucially upon keeping up this discourse of unreason, and preventing the alternative discourse which had held sway all these years and within which class struggles had generally been fought until now, from coming back to the centre-stage; if that discourse returns then it knows that its ascendancy will be over. But precisely because of the acute suffering that people have been exposed to because of the crisis of neo-liberalism, upon which the Covid-19 crisis has been superimposed, this discourse cannot be side-lined for long; it keeps coming back and threatening the hegemony of the BJP.

It had re-emerged strongly before the 2019 parliamentary elections when Delhi had witnessed a massive kisan rally, which in turn had followed a march by peasants in Maharashtra. But the Pulwama terrorist attack, followed by the Balakot air-strikes, brought back into vogue the discourse propounded by Hindutva, which played a major role in handing the Modi government a second term in office.

This second term has seen even more systematic, brutal, and concerted attacks on democratic rights, civil liberties, and lives of the people at large, of which the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, the denial of promised GST compensation to the states, the enactment of the patently discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act, the three Agriculture Bills, and the snatching away of workers' rights to a point where the gains made almost a century ago are being reversed, are some glaring instances. The lockdown announced at a mere four hours' notice in March, which left lakhs of migrant workers completely stranded without any shelter or income, and the complete niggardliness of the government in providing succour in this period to the working people who had lost their livelihoods, a niggardliness that was in striking contrast to what virtually every other bourgeois government in the world was providing, are further proof of the utter callousness and inhumanity of the Modi government. In fact this government has used the pandemic to carry out mass arrests and intimidation of all those who had protested peacefully against the Citizenship Amendment Act and whose protests had to be terminated because of the outbreak of the pandemic itself.

All these actions are sought to be justified by the government by foregrounding even more emphatically the discourse on which Hindutva thrives, a discourse of unreason, a discourse filled with narratives of conspiracies, treason and the need for vigilantism. In fact, we have a vicious cycle here. The more the government is unable to reverse the intensification of suffering that the crisis is bringing to the people, the more urgent becomes its need to distract them, to prevent them from getting back to the discourse of material life. For this it has to emphasize the Hindutva discourse even further; it has to manufacture even more outlandish and fantastic tales to embellish this discourse. Ever more far-fetched, even more weird myths have to be invented to keep the people distracted.

Amartya Sen has talked of the need of the Modi government to keep doing spectacular things which do not help the people but which keep them distracted. But even more than what it does, it has to keep inventing stories; and the worse the people's material life becomes under its watch, the more fanciful the stories have to

become to keep the Hindutva discourse going, the greater has to be the recourse to unreason.

The anti-democratic and anti-secular nature of the Hindutva forces has been widely noted. In fact democracy, secularism, and all the other Constitutional values upon which independent India is founded, presuppose a discourse of reason, whose fundamental hallmark is that it is pre-occupied with the “this sidedness” of life, that it perceives the public domain as being concerned with practical questions of material life. Hence no matter how loudly the Hindutva leaders profess their fidelity to the Constitution, the very discourse they propagate precludes any concern for democracy or secularism or the Constitution.

Ironically however, notwithstanding all their efforts, a discourse around practical issues keeps coming back, as it must, which only underscores the temporariness of Hindutva ascendancy. The Bihar elections saw once again a resurgence of concern over unemployment, and it is not surprising that notwithstanding the huge resources deployed by the NDA, the opposition alliance did so well (in fact it got a larger popular vote than the NDA). A positive achievement of the Bihar election has been the displacement of the discourse of unreason

The proposed strike on November 26 carries this process forward. It is the boldest attempt so far to bring back the discourse of reason centre-stage. And since the revival of democracy, of secularism, and Constitutional values, hinges upon the revival of a discourse of reason that is necessarily centred on issues of practical life, the November 26 strike is also simultaneously a strike for the defence of democracy and secularism.

*** This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on November 29, 2020.**